



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**DOSTOEVSKY'S PROTAGONISTS AS AN EMBODIMENT OF
NINETEENTH CENTURY RUSSIA: A NEW HISTORICIST READING**

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**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
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November 2002



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of University Putra Malaysia in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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New Historicism is applied in this examination of Dostoevsky's selected protagonists, the Underground Man and Raskolnikov. The protagonists' discourse and polemics are examined in relation to the cultural, political, social, economic and historical context of the 1860 Russia. The analysis shows an emerging pattern of a new social and economic order that alienates, displaces and subjugates the youth of the era.

The Underground Man's monologue and Raskolnikov's actions and psychological turmoil suggest an oppressive hand in the political and social system. It also highlights the beginnings of radicalism as a result of the existing suppression.

The dissonance in the protagonists' multi-layered polemics is examined as the mediated discourse, which implies domination, inequality among the working class and a perpetuation of class distinction. The discrimination causes dissatisfaction and marginalization among the underprivileged. The progressive ideas of the time encourage action that is directed by reason and rationalism. Indirectly the rationalistic

ideas become an excuse for the privileged to further dominate over these protagonists, which intensifies their alienation.

The protagonists' arguments and actions imply that the socialist ideology does not eradicate inequality. Contrarily, they accentuate the characters' displacement in the society. Furthermore, the innate corruptness of man is hinted as the reason for the failure of this utopianism. Dostoevsky's characterization is perhaps an attack on the degeneration of man and the values of the milieu. The analysis reflects a deep sense of loss and disillusionment in the protagonists in a materialistic society. The protagonists' discourse could be the voice of the intelligentsia or the nihilists of the era that reflects their alienation in a society where the reforms they believed would change the social order did not materialize.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi syarat untuk ijazah Master Sastera

PROTAGONIS DOSTOEVSKY MENONJOLKAN KEADAAN ABAD KE SEMBILAN BELAS RUSSIA: SATU PANDANGAN NEW HISTORICISM

Oleh

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“New Historicism” digunakan dalam penganalisan protagonis terpilih Dostoevsky, iaitu, Underground Man dan Raskolnikov dalam konteks budaya, politik, social, ekonomik dan sejarah Russia tahun 1860an. Perkembangan yang muncul ialah satu keadaan sosial dan ekonomi yang mengakibatkan pengasingan, penekanan dan konflik dalaman di kalangan para pemuda era itu.

Perwatakan kedua protagonis ini mencadangkan bahawa wujudnya elemen penindasan dalam sistem politik dan sosial masa itu. Akibat penindasan ini, unsur-unsur radikal dapat diperhatikan melalui watak-watak ini. Analisis ini memamparkan munculnya satu idea yang terselindung di sebalik perbicaraan protagonis ini. Suara protagonis ini memikul beberapa pesanan. Antaranya ialah layanan yang tidak sama rata di kalangan rakyat dan praktis membeza-bezakan rakyat menurut kelas. Penganalisaan protagonis terpilih ini juga membayangkan institusi politik era itu sebagai suatu yang membatasi perkembangan individu-individu ini.

Protagonis ini menyuarakan kekurangan ideologi sosialis sebagai satu perkembangan yang tidak membawa ketidaksamarataan di kalangan masyarakat, sebaliknya menonjolkan kekurangan manusia sendiri sebagai penyokong idea utopia ini. Perwatakan oleh Dostoevsky mungkin adalah satu kritikan tajam terhadap nilai- nilai manusia yang semakin merosot dalam jangka masa tersebut. Tambahan pula, watak- watak in dipaparkan sebagai mangsa di dalam sebuah masyarakat yang materialistik. Kemungkinan besar protagonis ini sedang memamparkan pengasingan yang di alami oleh kaum intelligensia dan golongan nihilis era itu yang menyedari bahawa reformasi sosial yang dihabarkan itu tidak menjadi nyata.

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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 15th November 2002 to conduct the final examination of M.B. Usha A/P M. Balakrishnan on her Master of Arts thesis entitled "Dostoevsky's Protagonists as an Embodiment of Nineteenth Century Russia: A New Historicist Reading" in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.



(M. B. Usha A/P M. Balakrishnan)

Date: 19-11-2002.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	ii
ABSTRAK	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
APPROVAL	vii
APPROVAL	viii
DECLARATION	ix
TABLE OF CONTENTS	x
CHAPTER	
I	
INTRODUCTION	1
Background of the Study	8
Scope of the Study	9
Significance of the Study	10
Limitations of the Study	11
Note on Translated Work	11
II	
LITERATURE REVIEW	
Introduction	13
Nineteenth Century Russia	
Historical Development	13
The Czar Regime	14
Liberal Ideologies	16
Westernization	20
The Serf Emancipation(1861)	22
Russian Literature	25
New Historicism	
Background and Characteristics of the Theory	29
Mediated Discourse	30
Biographies and Critical Studies on Dostoevsky	
Biographies	31
Critical Essays	35
III	
METHODOLOGY	
Introduction	39
Primary and Secondary Sources	40
Conceptual Theory	41
Analysis of the Texts	46



IV	DOSTOEVSKY'S PROTAGONISTS AND THE IMPACT OF NEW IDEOLOGIES	
	Introduction	51
	The Protagonists Reflect the 'Episteme' of the 1860s	52
	Domination Over the Underprivileged	66
	Conclusion	72
V	THE MEDIATED DISCOURSE OF DOSTOEVSKY'S PROTAGONISTS	
	Introduction	73
	An Oppressive Social and Political System	76
	A Transitional Society Marred by Materialism	82
	Conclusion	93
VI	CONCLUSION	
	Introduction	95
	History and Literature	98
	Conclusion	100
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	103
	APPENDICES	108
	BIODATA OF THE AUTHOR	111

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study analyses two novels of Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground* (NFUG) and *Crime and Punishment* (C&P) by applying the principles of New Historicism. Using the principles of New Historicism, a particular pattern of thought or sentiment that is unique to that historical epoch (known as the “episteme”) is traced in the literary work. The other focus is an examination based on the critical strategy of New Historicism that says that beneath the discourse in the novel, there lies another message that implies suppression and inequality in the society.

The underlying theme depicted by the protagonists can be identified in the subjugation they experience in their society. The oppressors in question have many faces; the western ideologies, the economic and political system and also the class-conscious society. These elements of the society push the protagonists to extreme psychological and emotional tensions. This again endorses the relevance of applying New Historicism in analysing Dostoevsky’s selected protagonists as it shows that there lies a subverted message of domination in the narrative. It is also an important objective of this study, which is to show that the protagonists are victims of the social rules of the nineteenth century Russia and feel displaced.

Dostoevsky’s novels of the 1860s describe circumstances of the social and political thoughts of the time. The 1860s are described as the years of reform, a time of new spirit, an eruption of energy and action. The serf emancipation in 1861 was an event



that triggered political, moral and social conflicts among the people. It was also a time when the society was starkly divided. One group championed the Czar's rule, supporting governmental reactionary measures, which had conservative leanings. The other group was the Westernizers who aspired for a constitutional monarchy and enthused after capitalism, economic growth and liberalization for Russia. Another awareness that emerged in the 1860s was a division, which existed because of the differences between two generations. Here the division was among the intellectuals of different generations. The older generation generally of the aristocracy held onto Romantic ideas whereas the nineteenth century intellectuals (popularly known as the *raznochintsy*) held onto rational ideas and nihilistic views. *Raznochintsy* is a Russian term that refers to the youths from the lower class who have had the opportunity to have an education (through the educational reforms implemented by Czar Alexander II) and were members of the intelligentsia of the 1860s.

One aim of the study is to show the inter-relatedness of the social, cultural and political circumstances of the 1860s in the characterization of Dostoevsky's protagonists, the Underground Man and Raskolnikov who can be considered as the *raznochintsy* of the time.

Dostoevsky's novels of the 1860s reflect the sentiments of the time. His writing is reactionary in nature where he advocates nationalism and is against liberal ideas. The ideas on radical liberalism and socialism are met with cynicism where "[he] was whole-heartedly in accord with the moral impulse inspiring the various Socialist

systems, but he was not persuaded that any of their panaceas could be put into practice” (Frank 252).

His attack is against the liberals and their ideals and his protagonists are either depiction of characters who revolt against these ideas or are characterized as advocates of the new reforms. However, Dostoevsky characterized the protagonists as individuals who are misled by the social surroundings and idealistic political thought. This style of writing, which embodies the sentiments of the time and also relates to historic events of the era, is an excellent plane where the theory of New Historicism can be applied.

One important element of the principles of New Historicism is that the sentiment of the time is echoed in the literary work. Beneath Dostoevsky’s narration elements of suppression can be detected. The Underground Man and Raskolnikov are characterized as individuals who not only reflect different entities like the nihilists and the rationalists of the era but also illustrate the oppression that exists in certain sections of the society.

In *NFUG*, Dostoevsky exposes an embittered man who is also in an obscure way concerned at the way the political ideologies of the era are heading. The setting and the development of ideas in 1860 Russia worry him as he feels the ideas expounded are all against the human grain. His disgust and displeasure towards the liberals who advocate rationalism as the solution of man’s sorrows are scathingly expressed

throughout this novel. One main novelist whom Dostoevsky attacks is Chernysvesky¹ who wrote *What is to be Done?* in 1863 as a novel that claimed to have the answer to Social Utopianism. Beneath the criticism of the ideologies of progress and improvement there is also a sense of disillusionment as the protagonists face the impracticality of these ideas.

The study examines the novel as a mediated discourse where the multi-voiced protagonists are perceived to be actually imparting another message behind their discourse. Mediated discourse is defined as “one that purports to talk about one topic, while it is through that discussion also talking about a different, perhaps more abstract topic” (Lynch 98). For example, the Underground Man’s arguments in conversation express his anger at the social circumstances, illustrates his disgust at his own servility and provide a sarcastic response to the prevalent ideology of material improvement. At the same time the Underground Man may also be talking of the political and social system of the 1860s, indicating the existence of oppression and inequality.

There is an implication of subjugation in terms of self-individuality. The objective of the study is to reflect that Dostoevsky’s protagonists are not rebellious or recalcitrant youths but are individuals who echo the spirit of the time, the conflict of existence. They desire to have freedom in thought and action but their predicament implies that

¹ Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky was a typical member of the Russian intelligentsia of the second half of the nineteenth century who was a fervent believer in the power of reason and rationality to promote the great cause of progress. He is the author of *What is to be Done?* written while in prison, imprisoned for inciting revolutionary activities.

the political system, economic social order and social dogmas do not allow it, creating contradictions and disillusionment in them.

In *C&P*, which Dostoevsky wrote in 1866, the protagonist is the depiction of the intelligentsia of that time. The intelligentsia of the 1860s are not necessarily from the gentry' but have had or are attending university education. The protagonist is projected as one who is riddled with conflict, a predicament that is reflective of the flux brought about by ideological change in the society. The social changes brought about by the Peterine reign, the irreversible influence of Westernization² and the fall of the Orthodox Christianity are among the historical events that can be linked in order to analyse this protagonist as one who is thrown into a turmoil of the milieu. The Western philosophies and ideologies, which had infiltrated into Russia, were influences that could not be erased by the vigorous censorship of the reactionary government. The rise of the "new men" of the sixties, quite radical in ideas and actions are criticized as youths who were misled by the Western idealism.

Another objective of the study is to show that Dostoevsky's writing was an attack on the ideology of scientific rationalism and to examine if the protagonists resemble the nihilists³ who were ardent followers of this ideology.

² Represented by broad-minded landowners and also members of the aristocracy who aspired for a constitutional monarchy modeled after the British and also expected drastic changes in the economy.

³ Left-winged ideology, popular among the Russian youths. They were optimistic liberals who believed that a rational utopian society could be constructed based on the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number.

Raskolnikov is projected as one who is comfortable with the lowly and poverty-stricken. He wishes to be invisible by merging into the ragged and beleaguered denizens of St Petersburg. His actions and thoughts show that he detests those economically better off than he is. Dostoevsky characterizes him as an egoistic and arrogant youth who feels acutely his pauperism, which is intensified by the materialistic society of the era. He is alienated by the social and economic situation where his poverty is one of the reasons that push him to commit murder. These issues emerge from the novel as tensions of the social and cultural milieu and how it challenges the protagonist to fight against this tension. He then becomes the character who reflects the two conflicting ideas of the time; the conservative who has a conscience and the liberal who wants to believe that he is above the law. The existing radical principles enable him to embrace the nihilistic ideas of the 1860s, where any action is permissible as long as it is beneficial to man.

Dostoevsky could be indicating that the change in ideology where material gain was favoured and the new ideas of reform to cater for industrialization have brought in capitalism to the country and have inadvertently brought about a mercenary society.

Another influential aspect of history that is considered in this study is the role of the Czar. Even though Westernization changed the outlook of the younger generation, the oppressive regime of Nicholas I ensured that there was no practice in liberal thoughts or action. However, this could have triggered subversive movements that culminated into radicalism in Russia.

The years of reform carried out by Nicholas' successor, Alexander II were in motion but the general masses did not see an improvement in their social status especially in alleviating their self-dignity. The serf emancipation was a great boost to the idea of freedom even though the peasants were still under the control of the local government (*zemstvos*). However the emancipation of the serfs did arouse in the subjects a sense of assertion and freedom. The underlying theme depicted in the protagonists is the tussle of having the freedom to act in the wake of restricting forces in the system. The Underground Man could not take action though his instincts insisted on it. Raskolnikov too echoes this, while contemplating his intended murder. He says: "But I am talking too much. That's why I don't act, just because I am always talking. Or perhaps I talk so much just because I can't act" (2). However, the genius Dostoevsky reveals that self-assertion is not as easily assimilated especially if it is among a generation which is under an autocratic regime that ensured submission and servility.

Another element of the study is to relate the literary work to the historical development of the era to show that there is a strong influence and also that the general belief of the time may not have been the exact situation. The literary texts can be interpreted to reflect a clearer perspective of the era. The analysis aims to show that the emotional and psychological implications of the Czar regime and the reforms it took created an euphoria in the historical sense but in reality it brought about more suffering and loss among the people. This realism of the time is the perspective of this study and is traced in these two protagonists of Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky's opinion on the current issues and his own awareness of the existing oppression is stated as, "Like all the intelligentsia, he was of course oppressed by the general lack of freedom in Russian social life . . . " (Frank 247). Thus it is also plausible to say that this awareness of the author is also present in the characterization of his protagonists, which is indeed a tenet in New Historicism.

Background to the Study

Analysis and investigation on Dostoevsky's characters from the psychological point of view has been varied and plenty. Applying New Historicism in analysing Dostoevsky's protagonists highlights the complexity that exists in the transitional Russian society. The issues that arise also reflect that history is not a moment in time but an event that is identified over and over again in other societies in the world. This element distinguishes this study as one that shows the relevance of the past in the present. It is also contemporary as the issues of the society such as ideological change, cultural and economic development and the individual's predicament in a transitional society are matters that most societies identify with.

Furthermore Dostoevsky did not believe that art was for art's sake and felt that the author has a responsibility to the masses:

Like most people of his time, he was convinced that the artist's supreme duty was to assume political and moral leadership, that one should write about life and respond to the calls of contemporary events. (Slonim 276)

Thus, it is not wrong to say that the effects of the social and political milieu of the 1860s emerge from the analysis of this study and the protagonists reflect the contemporary sentiments in society. In addition to this, it is possible to discern a sense of alienation and displacement in the protagonists by the very same liberal ideas that advocated reform and progress. Hence, this study aspires to contribute to the literary studies of Dostoevsky's mainly in the historical, social and cultural aspects.

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study is confined to *C&P* (see Appendix A) and *NFUG* (see Appendix B). These novels of the 1860s depict a characterization that reflect the sentiments and consciousness from the early eighteen hundreds to eighteen-sixties. The time frame that ranges from the 1840s to the 1860s is important, as they are the years of reform and flux in Russian literature and history. It is also important to bear in mind that with these novels, Dostoevsky claimed that he had embarked on reactionary writing where the tone was against liberalism. The writings showed leanings towards conservatism and nationalism. This analysis suggests that there is a covert message behind the writings.

Significance of the Study

Russian literature provides a wealth of insight into the human mind and behaviour. Furthermore, many of the issues addressed in Russian literature are universal thoughts; the folly of man, the resilience of man and also a strong emphasise on social issues and human relationships. Among the issues this study looks into are the eagerness of youths to embrace ideologies, the decadence of man due to materialism and the regression in humanity. Detrimental effects of following idealism blindly and the adverse effects of materialism are issues experienced by most contemporary societies where the emphasise tends to be on material wealth and individualism.

Selecting Dostoevsky's literary work for my research is an unexpected decision. I was drawn to Dostoevsky's work after reading *C&P* as I felt quite disturbed at the way in which nature of man and his feeble mind was illustrated so accurately in the novel. It was uncanny to read about human nature at its worst and weakest. Furthermore, the plot and psychological development of the characters were so intense that one is drawn into the emotion and psyche of the characters. Such intensity in a novel was also a new and captivating experience, which was another reason Dostoevsky's works interested me. These elements of the novel attracted me to consider reading Dostoevsky for my research. Further reading revealed that his narratives are intense but at the same time fascinating and stirring.

Furthermore, the condition of the Petersburg underprivileged and their struggle as depicted by Dostoevsky are similar to the experience of most societies in transition. The lower middle class grapples with poverty and displacement in the rapid economic development of the country. Economic reforms tend to lead to capitalism and this brings about other implications. The denizens in 1860s St. Petersburg struggle to fit into the newly formed capitalistic society of that time. Thus, the study can be seen as one that reflects the societal elements of a particular era (1860s Russia) and at the same time these elements can be identified in contemporary societies.

Limitations of the Study

The novels are literary texts studied from translation. As such the reading of these novels may have lost some of their cultural essence. However, the texts used are written by credible translators who have studied Russian and have done extensive research in Russian literature.

Note on Translated Work

The novels used in this analysis are translated by reputable publishers namely the Penguin Classics and The World Oxford Classics. This in itself gives credit to the translator as these publishing houses are reputable publishers who take great pride in producing literary works, translations and critical essays. Kentish, Coulson and Magarshack are credible translators who have captured the essence of the country and its literature.

Translated work when carried out by credible and meticulous writers can be identified as a work of art. First and foremost, the act of translation is an art in itself and each translator has his or her own unique style.

Dostoevsky's translated novels are able to provoke readers, many who are not native to the Russian language and to instigate discussion because his themes and ideas are identified universally. The ability of these works to affect their readers emotionally shows that the aesthetic qualities of the original work have been retained in the translated works and they are thus able to cross the boundaries of race and creed.

Incidentally, Boris Pasternak, the famous Russian writer whose novels have been translated into English and other languages, sees the relationship between the original and the translation as "between what is fundamental and what is derived from it, between a trunk and a cutting" (Bassnett 2).

Apart from this, another statement of Pasternak that supports the study on translated works is, "... [translations] are conceivable, because ideally they too should be works of art and, in sharing a common text, should stand on a level with the original through their own uniqueness" (Bassnett 2).

Hence the translated work is seen not as a text which is somehow less in stature of the original but as a work that is intimately related to the original and the text is considered as a product of creative process with aesthetic significance.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The reading undertaken for this research includes:

1. The History of Russia and Russian Literature mainly of the nineteenth century.
2. The concepts of New Historicism.
3. Biographies and Critical works on Dostoevsky.

Nineteenth Century Russia

Historical Development

The Russian history of the nineteenth century was dominated by the Czar regime ranging from Czar Alexander I (1801-1825), to Nicholas I (1825-1855) and to Alexander II (1855-1881). The autocracy demanded respect and reverence from its subjects. They also had brought about irreversible changes onto their subjects through their rule. Before the nineteenth century, Russia experienced widespread Westernization during the reign of Peter The Great and in the early years of Catherine.

Literary articles on Russian studies and history, show that the Russian Church was extremely powerful and at the same time the papal theocracy recognized the rights of the monarch in intervening in churchly affairs apart from holding the throne. The national monarchy was vested with extreme power, initially a necessity to keep order among subjects. Basically, it was the feudal aristocracy and the gentry who upheld the